

## The Battle of New Market

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On the former the author scores high, for this is truly popular history on the classical model, as even the most casual inspection of the chapter bibliographies will suggest. On the latter the score is much lower. No matter how carefully the author has sugar-coated the complexities of Northwest Coast Indian history and culture with the now popular themes of environmentalism and ecological balance, he simply has not engaged in the kind of serious research required to achieve his objective.

How, for example, can one discuss the plight of the Northwest Coast fishermen, wholly outnumbered and confronted with European power politics, technology, and epidemic disease on the grand scale, with no mention of the role played by the Aborigines Protection Society in the Crown's formulation of a workable native policy? What of the great debate over assimilation in the early nineteenth century? How can one "properly" consider nearly two centuries of white aggression unless one examines at least a few of the unpublished manuscripts in the PRO in London, the PAC in Ottawa, or the Rhodes House Library? And what of the serious literature dealing with diplomatic maneuvers for control of the Northwest Coast?

Easy. Congratulate the anthropologists for their fine work among less fortunate people; take a trip to the scene (as the author did in 1973) and become an on-the-spot authority; compose twenty-nine lucid essays (with no footnotes) on *selected* topics of Northwest Coast Indian history and culture; and the plumber in Cleveland with thirteen dollars to spend will be satisfied. Readers of more serious purpose should look elsewhere.

—William E. Unrau

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*The Battle Of New Market*, by William C. Davis. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co. 1975. pp. 248. Appendices, notes, index. \$8.95.

The Battle of New Market in May 1864 in the South's bread-basket, the Shennandoah Valley of Virginia, is rightly considered a high point in Confederate military history. "There was no secondary battle of more importance in the war," declared one of the

Confederate commanders who was probably overstating the case. But it was important in that it temporarily choked a Union threat to sever a vital railway line to Richmond. This gave Lee's forces the fruits of the Valley's harvest and allowed the victorious General John C. Breckinridge to shift much of his force eastward to help repulse Grant at Cold Harbor. And the Cold Harbor debacle did much to insure that the Civil War would run one more bloody year.

At New Market the Virginia Military Institute cadet corps fought courageously, suffering the second highest proportion of casualties of all rebel units in the battle. It was, in fact, the cadets' performance which gave the battle the fame it has—although it can be argued that New Market should have been recognized as important had the corps not been there at all. Fortunately author William Davis keeps the cadet's exploits in perspective. They had plenty of help from other battle-tested southern soldiers.

Another factor in the Confederate victory was the ineptitude of the Union commander, the rarely victorious General Franz Sigel. Sigel's military record, including military engagements in which he had some commanding role, in the German Revolution of 1848 as well as the Civil War, comes out to something like three wins and eight losses—and that's being charitable. Sigel's forces, to be sure, were not the cream of the Union armies, particularly the 12th West Virginia regiment which had yet to win any encounter with the rebels. Other units, however, notably the 54th Pennsylvania and the 34th Massachusetts, were competent and fought ably. But their efforts were insufficient to overcome the poor generalship of Sigel who seems to have done almost nothing well except to demonstrate personal bravery in retreat.

It is interesting to note that Grant didn't expect too much out of Sigel's drive into the Valley. But he wasn't asking much either: only that he and other Union commands in the West Virginia region keep Confederate troops occupied so they couldn't reinforce Lee along the Rapidan. Given this important but less-than-impossible task, they failed.

Sigel was nobody's favorite general except among the German-Americans. Since they were a potent political force in the North, he got more than the average number of opportunities to demonstrate his lack of military aptitude.

A reader is inclined, therefore, to believe that almost any CSA general could have carried the day for the South at New Market. Davis comes close to admitting such. But ultimately he makes the case (a good one), that Breckinridge did a masterful job with numerically inferior forces. In particular he succeeded in doing what a good general must do under such a handicap, namely, juggle his troops so as to meet the enemy at the crucial points with numerically larger forces. This he did effectively, partly because he had somewhat better troops qualitatively. Breckinridge, in addition, made superb use of his artillery.

The cadets' first role in the battle was to fill in a gap in the Confederate line, which they did under heavy fire, losing five dead in the process. Thereafter they took part in a successful charge on a Union artillery position, capturing one gun and sixty to one hundred prisoners. By the time the battle was over their 226 effectives were reduced by ten killed and forty-five wounded, 24.3% of their unit strength. Davis' description of the charge is typical of his admirable tendency to forego legend in favor of history. The cadets' opponents were an already badly battered force, the 1st West Virginia which provided feeble assistance to the 30th New York battery before retreating. "They [the Cadets] had taken—or, more correctly, had been given—the center of the Federal line, . . ." the author writes. They did well with what they got, however, and with the rest of the Confederate troops turned their fire on the stubborn Pennsylvania regiment, forcing it to withdraw in defeat also.

Though the cadet corps' charge has long been portrayed in dramatic terms, Davis' two paragraphs describing the charge of the courageous but ill-used 34th Massachusetts makes clear that this command drove forward through real hell to accomplish nothing against a secure position even after the tide of battle had turned against the entire northern force. And the Massachusetts men suffered forty-three percent casualties including thirty killed.

Later in the summer and the fall of 1864 Generals David Hunter and Philip Sheridan scoured the Valley in a manner Sigel probably wouldn't have emulated even if it had been within the scope of his abilities. The result for the inhabitants was devastation of their land and the end of its days as a source of supply for Lee's armies.

Davis' account of the whole New Market battle is not one which romanticizes combat—the VMI cadets didn't die prettily, nor did anyone else. It is, rather, an empathetic narrative which relates the action of the opposing forces with enough detail to enlighten but (generally), not so much as to confuse. This is not, then, sopoforic military history which only a lover of the genre could appreciate.

—H. H. Wubben  
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*Correspondence of James K. Polk*, Volume III: 1835-1836, edited by Herbert Weaver and Kermit L. Hall. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press. 1975. Map, illustrations and index, pp. xxxvi, 836. \$25.00.

With this volume Herbert Weaver and Kermit Hall continue the work of editing and publishing the correspondence of James K. Polk. Only two years, 1835-1836, are covered in this volume, reflecting the growing body of Polk's correspondence. During this period Polk began to be rewarded for his party regularity and emerged as one of the principal Jacksonian leaders. At the end of 1835, after considerable political infighting and maneuvering, Polk was elected as speaker of the House of Representatives, a post he was to hold for the next four years. 1836 was a presidential election year and Polk as speaker endeavored to maintain party unity and in particular to hold his home state of Tennessee for the Jacksonians, an effort which failed.

In producing this volume, Weaver and Hall sifted through "almost a thousand letters" in selecting the 690 that were published, 506 in full and 184 in summarized form. As was the case with the previous two volumes of Polk's correspondence, most of the letters in this volume are to Polk. Only 116 letters are written by Polk and many of these are merely acknowledgments to constituents or letters written on their behalf to government officials.

Nonetheless, there are many historically valuable letters in this volume. Letters to and from political personages like Andrew Jackson, Andrew Jackson Donelson, Felix Grundy, and Cave Johnson provide considerable insights into the workings of the

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